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ABSTRACT

The Catholic Education Office of Sydney, Australia, has completed the first year of a 3-year literacy initiative which included an early literacy strand providing professional development for all kindergarten, Year One, and Year Two teachers, with a particular focus on the needs of beginning readers and writers. This paper outlines the planning, delivery, and evaluation of the professional development provided to teachers in early literacy training. In addition to the structure of the course, the paper outlines key features of the course evaluation and describes the following elements: refining classroom practices; linking Early Literacy with the English K-6 strand; selecting guest speakers; developing displays; producing materials; networking among schools; and preparing for the next year. Contains 36 references. (AMC)

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A SYSTEM'S LITERACY INITIATIVE : REFINING AND ENRICHING EARLY LITERACY PRACTICES IN CLASSROOMS

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A SYSTEM'S LITERACY INITIATIVE : REFINING AND ENRICHING EARLY LITERACY PRACTICES IN CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

The Catholic Education Office, Sydney, has completed the first year of a three year literacy initiative. The initiative has two distinct strands : English K-6, providing primary teachers with professional development related to the current NSW English syllabus document; and Early Literacy, providing professional development for all Kindergarten, Year One and Year Two teachers with a particular focus on the needs of beginning readers and writers. This paper outlines the planning, delivery and evaluation of the professional development provided by the Early Literacy strand during 1995 for Kindergarten teachers and a member of the school executive from the 115 primary schools in the system. Places were also offered to non-systemic schools in the Archdiocese of Sydney. An expected outcome of the initiative is that teaching practices will be refined and enriched as schools develop K-6 literacy plans that reflect their school's needs and a balanced approach to literacy teaching and learning. The system has begun to collect quantitative as well as qualitative data in order to monitor changes in literacy achievement and track the progress of a random sample of its students.

Introduction

The literacy initiative is based on our priorities for students as stated in the system's strategic management plan: "Towards 2000"

"....we commit ourselves to providing quality education for our students by developing goals and strategies which provide for high quality teaching and learning programs which address the diverse needs of our students.... "

This paper will attempt to describe this literacy initiative as one strategy employed by the system to support and enrich high quality teaching and learning programs in literacy, that by their very nature, take into consideration the diverse needs of its students. The initiative was planned to achieve a lift in students' literacy achievements by giving teachers the opportunity to reflect on their personal beliefs about how children learn, hear from a range of presenters, extend their 'kid-watching' skills, carry out action research in their classrooms and share information with their colleagues. In an attempt to meet the needs of the client group, classroom teachers, principals and educators from central and regional offices have been involved in the planning, delivery and evaluation of the Early Literacy strand.

Background

- In June 1994 the Head of Curriculum Services, in collaboration with a consultant from each region and the Early Literacy adviser prepared a draft Archdiocesan Literacy Strategy 1995-1997 which addressed the issue of quality literacy programs. The strategy set out to build on the successful practices in our schools and to provide professional development which would

get more children underway early with literacy learning.

- An application for funding through the Early Literacy Component of the Commonwealth's National Equity Program for Schools for professional development for teachers was successful and
- Catholic Education Office provided further support to the strategy by providing teacher release days for class teachers attending inservice courses
- A Primary Education Officer was appointed to co-ordinate the Literacy Strategy
- Schools were informed of the Literacy Strategy and its component parts which included the centre, the region and the schools and which encouraged networking across regions and between clusters of schools.
- English K-6 in the Classroom Facilitators' Course and the Early Literacy Course were offered to schools via the Professional Development Handbook
- Regional funding was made available so that schools could decide the nature and extent of the support they required beyond the core courses
- The responsibility for the implementation of the strands of the strategy lay with the Education Officers: Primary Curriculum. The responsibility for the detail of the Early Literacy Course remained with the Early Literacy advisers.

Planning and Preparation

The logistics of working with over 300 participants provided many challenges. We decided to run the Course over five days so there would be sufficient time between sessions for participants to reflect on their classroom practice and carry out some action research which could be shared in subsequent sessions. Although the space we used was large enough to accommodate these numbers, the acoustics were not perfect and we knew that many teachers would not be confident to share across such a big group. To counteract this negative we planned for sharing to occur in smaller groups (grade, executive, school teams).

Planning for the course began in September 1994 with input from consultants, advisers, principals and teachers who were particularly passionate about meeting the diverse literacy needs of students in our system. Early in 1995 Sue and I met again with consultants, advisers, key principals who had already initiated change in literacy in their schools, and teachers, to share with them our plans to date. We invited feedback and made further changes. Throughout 1995, we met to plan the overview and course content for each day and from this, the detailed planning of each day was done together, with the responsibility for certain segments divided between us.

We wanted to present a balance of theory and practical ideas; input and teacher interaction; action and reflection. Overall, we aimed for balance across the whole year and balance across each day of the course. We planned to use different media and different presenters. We organised a range of displays that would support the implementation of a balanced literacy program. We continued to work from the original overview but we also responded to the needs and requests in the teachers' evaluations, by adding to and expanding on the content.

The Early Literacy Course

Because it was designed to foster a team approach, the course was offered to all Kindergarten teachers and an executive staff member from each school. In smaller schools, the Kindergarten teacher was joined by the Year 1 teacher and a member of the school executive. The Course was delivered over five days, to six groups of approximately sixty teachers. In all, three hundred and fifty teachers attended. In 1996 it is planned to hold five, five day courses, with similar numbers in 1997. In developing a team approach to literacy planning there should be a core of staff who are able to induct new staff members to current literacy practice. It is hoped that teachers will also be able to offer professional advice and support to one another as they put into practice the strategies and understandings from the course.

We have been influenced by the work of Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) and we felt that the team approach, with the close involvement of an executive staff member were critical to the achievement of course outcomes. Fullan and Hargreaves stress that in order to effect successful and sustained change, simultaneous work is needed on the total school context and teacher development. They define teacher development as not just learning the skills and practices of an innovation but addressing different dimensions of change in order to reconstruct one's beliefs and theories in line with the instructional approaches and the resources used. They emphasise the need for teachers to have opportunities to work with and learn from their colleagues. We expected the Early Literacy Course would provide the setting for change and the support for participants to develop and refine their teaching practice through the opportunities we planned for them :

- To examine their beliefs about how children learn to read and write
- To collect and analyse data which demonstrates the development of a reading and writing process
- To organise resources to meet the needs of the children in their own classes
- To administer the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement
- To analyse data collected and plan specific teaching/learning experiences around it

Structure of the Course

Each day contained a key idea and following Day 1 there was time allotted for teachers to revisit and share experiences related to the between session activities. These involved taking running records of text reading and collecting writing samples as well as bringing along practical ideas that worked for them in their classrooms. Teachers shared their organisational aids including task boards and timetables, examples of programming proformas, assessments using the early learning profiles and examples of linking with the English K-6 Syllabus outcomes and profiles approach by planning and trialling one of the English units supplied to schools. A clearview folder was given to each participant at the beginning of the course so they could keep a cumulative record of session content, between session activities, course notes and a record of the case studies of those children whose literacy development they had followed most closely throughout the year.

Day1:Literacy Acquisition
System & Course objectives
Setting personal objectives
How do children learn language?
The reading process
Taking running records
Balanced literacy programs
Classroom organisation
Evaluation

Day2:Resources for Reading
Analysis of Running Records
Levelling texts
Matching texts to children
Guided reading
Selecting and organising resources
Revisiting classroom organisation
Refining our view of the reading process
Evaluation

Day3:Writing
The writing process
Analysis of writing samples
Discussion of case study chn
Organisation of the writing program
Assessment using the Early Learning Profiles
Evaluation

Day4:Observation
Administration of the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay M.M.)
Discussion of case study chn
School literacy plans
Evaluation

Day 5:Implications for Teaching
Analysis of the Observation Survey
How will you use it in your school?
Implications for teaching
Discussion of case study chn
Executives~100 Schools Project - Literacy Programs Study Primary Education Officer
Teachers ~Discussion of trialling of English unit
Peer tutoring : Paired Writing
Course evaluation

Key Features of the Course

Evaluation

There has been ongoing evaluation by the teachers of their teaching practice in light of their understandings of the acquisition stages of reading and writing; of their children's progress over time; and of the course. The course presenters have evaluated their roles and responded to teachers' needs and requests wherever possible, while remaining true to the initial objectives. Wendy Bean, an educational consultant providing support to the initiative, has been an integral part of the evaluation. She has consulted with us about the content and design of each day's evaluation, and collated and analysed teachers' responses for heads of departments at Catholic Education Office. This information will be used, in conjunction with a longitudinal study of children's literacy achievement, to measure the effectiveness of the course. A random sample of 20% of teachers participating in the course were asked to submit data on their case study children. This included running records and writing samples collected throughout the year and the Observation Survey results from Term 4. These children will be monitored in 1996 and 1997 to measure change over time in literacy levels.

Linking Theory with Practice

The theory base for the course is Marie Clay's interactive theory of children as constructors of their own learning and her definition of reading provided a sound basis for discussion around particular programs and resources.

> *'I define reading as a message-getting, problem-solving activity which increases in power and flexibility the more it is practised'*
>
> (Clay 1991)

We have emphasised that knowing how children become readers and writers will determine the type of literacy programs we provide and the ways we assess early reading and writing behaviours. The course text, Clay's *Becoming Literate, the Construction of Inner Control*, 1991, was provided to each school.

Refining classroom practices

We wanted to revisit and refine understandings of the key ideas which were presented each day including the need for ongoing observation of children and linking assessment with the planning of teaching and learning activities. We also believed that children should be independent, self motivated learners and helped teachers with organisational strategies that would achieve this. Underlying this was our belief that if teachers understand how children become readers and writers they will be better able to provide balanced programs that include the necessary elements to achieve this. On each of the days there was at least one sharing session. Teachers were invited to share ideas and over the five days they brought along examples of child and teacher made books, outcomes-based programming outlines, timetables, task boards and units of work as well as reading and writing observations of their case study children. These provided great sharing opportunities and promoted some lively

discussion.

Linking Early Literacy with the English K-6 strand

Throughout the year the English K-6 document and the early learning profiles were used as we explored the features of a balanced literacy program. As teachers analysed the children's reading and writing samples they identified the pointers or indicators that the children demonstrated and linked these to the early learning profiles. The most effective way to help teachers to get hold of the language of the document was through the trialling of an English K-6 Teaching Unit . This gave them a framework from which to begin. They responded to the units in a variety of ways, depending on how familiar they were with an outcomes approach to planning. Further work in this area will be offered at the school and regional level. It is felt that this process of becoming familiar with all aspects of the document will take time and is one of the thrusts of the other strand of the Archdiocesan Literacy Strategy.

Time to address issues and concerns
Many opportunities were given to teachers to discuss issues in small groups and in an open forum. As the year progressed many areas that had been major issues were resolved because teachers had the opportunity to try things out in their class and refine the use of some assessment procedures at the course, and at school with the support of their colleagues.

Guest Speakers
Guest spots by classroom teachers, whose practice is recognised within their schools as exemplary, was a feature of the course. Participants really valued hearing from other classroom teachers who were successfully implementing balanced literacy programs.

The following sessions were given by teachers:
- Writing and Mathematics
- Writing in Kindergarten
- Early Literacy and the ESL child
- Balance in the Kindergarten Literacy Program
- Peer tutoring : Paired writing
- Organising for Effective Literacy Learning

On Day 4 of each Course, a different school shared their school's literacy plan designed to ensure effective literacy practices are in action throughout the whole school. The variety in presentation and content was wide. Some schools were just beginning to look at their whole school plan while others had already been planning in this way for some time using the English K-6 document. The presentations enabled participants to understand that the process is as important as the product, that the involvement of all staff in that process is vital, that programs that are school-based and teacher-driven rather than imposed from without are more likely to be successful and that without a shared understanding of the listed outcomes it is not wise to proceed!

English Advisers, who were also participants in the Early Literacy Course, provided extra support for the course by sharing their experiences with a number of schools where programming proformas have been designed and different ways of planning and programming using an outcomes and profiles approach are being trialled.

Displays
We planned displays that would be an integral part of the course supporting the content of each day and providing participants with the opportunity to browse or to purchase new resources particularly suited to the early years of schooling. Selected publishers and book sellers were invited to set up their displays which included a wide range of texts for beginning readers, including quality literature; technological aids which support literacy learning, including software and CD-ROM packages; and teacher reference books.
Some teachers brought photographs of classrooms in action showing different aspects of their literacy program, displays of children's work and ways of organising and managing classrooms. These were displayed for all to see. Photographs of resource rooms showing different ways of

accommodating reading resources were also featured.

Production of Materials

The Book Collection : This publication lists a collection of books for beginning readers which has been sorted into three broad bands to indicate the emergent early and fluency stages. Within each of these bands there is a gradient of difficulty identified by colour and corresponding to the colour bands of the "Ready to Read" series (Lioncrest Troll). The purpose of The Book Collection is to provide a guide for schools reorganising existing resources or purchasing quality resources for children, in particular for Guided Reading.

Writing and Mathematics : This publication arose out of a presentation by Michele Williams, who teaches at St Charles, Waverley. Michele presented evidence of children's developing mathematical understandings through their personal writing of hands-on maths experiences. Michele believes that a critical element of effective writing - talk resulted in children being able to demonstrate engagement in both the maths and writing processes.

Videos : Videos, as yet unedited, which provide glimpses of classrooms in action with a particular focus on organising for Guided Reading. After editing, we hope to use them with teachers in successive years.

Networking

We had expected that networking between schools would be an outcome of the course. There was some informal networking with teachers arranging visits to each others schools to view classrooms and the organisation of reading resources. In one region, cluster network meetings were coordinated by principals to support particular areas of early literacy. In other regions, networking opportunities were planned by the English Advisers. We observed that generally teachers waited for networking arrangements to be set up by others rather than initiate them. This could be due in part to the need for teacher release to network in school hours.

Within schools many teachers have met regularly with the principal or executive member who attended the course and who is responsible for supporting and monitoring the implementation of the course content in classrooms. Some teachers have addressed staff meetings to inform other grade teachers and in some schools there has been a total reorganisation of reading materials to make them accessible to all.

Looking ahead

The preparation for 1996 has already begun. A planning committee including a regional consultant, the education officer: primary English, an English adviser and a principal met with the early literacy advisers in September to consider recommendations from the course evaluations. The timing of various aspects of the course will differ and we will work with two smaller groups in separate rooms for most sessions of the Course. We will endeavour to match the input to the needs of the teachers in the same way we have been promoting that ideal for their students. The smaller groupings should make for even more interaction and more productive sharing sessions. To overcome the problem of staff changes, teachers who missed the Course in 1995 and who are

teaching Kindergarten will be able to attend in 1996. The participation of an executive staff member who will take a key role in the school's implementation of an effective school literacy plan continues, as it is seen to be a vital part of the overall Literacy Strategy.

Conclusion

Whilst we tend to agonise over the shortcomings of the course and we are continually evaluating our roles as presenters, we are encouraged by the feedback we have received from participants, principals, consultants and directors. We have included here some examples from the final day's evaluations....

"It was a useful initiative, a balance of theory and practical rather than the one day quick fix bandaid inservice. There should be more like it."

"It was good that there were so many presenters, with Val and Sue linking it together. Great program, waiting to send the Year 1 cohort next year"

"I have found this a very practical course which has been invigorating. I felt I left each session keen to implement new strategies within my classroom"

We anticipate that as the Archdiocesan Literacy Strategy moves into 1996 and beyond the within school work of the initial group of participants will be further strengthened and supported by the new groups of teachers and executive staff so that together, it will be possible to develop a growing whole school commitment to the ideals of early literacy and early intervention. This, in turn, will improve literacy outcomes for children in the early years of schooling across our system.

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